

Good Morning,

As an 18 year veteran of public elementary school education, I can quite honestly say that for the first 15 years of my career I believe I had the best career in the world. I began teaching in a self-contained classroom in 1996 at the age of 42. I considered myself fortunate to have this position after teaching Physical Education for 15 years. I eat, drink and sleep thinking about my students and how to best move them forward with their thinking and learning.

Over the years I have embraced every opportunity to improve myself as an educator. I relished any opportunity to pilot new curriculum or think again about best practices. I felt empowered as a professional to select great lessons and deliver them with my personal best enthusiasm. I worked hard and so did my students. There were many challenges along the way but with the support of my colleagues, support staff and principal, I felt I had an efficient and effective arsenal to approach and conquer any difficulties that arose.

In the past three years, that enthusiasm and pride in my chosen profession has waned. As “data driven” became the mantra and scripted lessons became the rule rather than the exception, I have lost my identity as an educator. The things that I have been “required” to do for the sake of data run contrary to my instincts with over 30 years of teaching experience.

Within the first 6 weeks of 3rd grade I am required to give 11 assessments. All this as I am trying to get to know my students and build a classroom environment where 8-year-olds can become risk takers regarding their learning. Immediately these children view me as their adversary or even worse, someone who is trying to discover their every weakness. Is this the best way to motivate and instill a life-long love of learning?

As a district that performs above all State goals on standardized testing, why am I being targeted to change the way I teach? Why am I now spending my weekends researching how to write my goals rather than how to facilitate learning? Why is curriculum being developed on the fly to align with the new SBAC test giving classroom teachers little or no time to master this? Why are teachers being targeted to solve all of society’s problems? Are we responsible to now raise our students as well as our own personal children?

As I approach the end of my career, I can honestly say my profession has morphed into a beast I don’t even recognize. I no longer feel the strong connection to my students because I’m given so little time to truly get to know them. I am constantly stressed and worried about the next assessment, the next “goal”, the next observation, the next scripted lesson, the next bureaucratic piece of paper that I will be required to complete. I am concerned about being pulled out of my classroom to be “trained” for the next unit I will be expected to begin in two days. I need to be in my classroom with my students to be an effective educator.

In closing I will cite one very clear and concise example of how teaching has changed. Three years ago I had a student with a life-threatening medical diagnosis. This child (an 8 year-old) was undergoing treatment and was not attending school regularly. The State Department of Education required this child to take the Connecticut Mastery Tests even as she was undergoing life-saving medical treatment that had decimated her body physically and psychologically. When I advocated for her I was reprimanded by my district. This is when I “got it”. I didn’t matter nor did my student. It’s all about the politics. Certainly I learned that I am powerless to the “powers that be” when it comes to compliance but I will continue to advocate for my students regardless of the personal implications because I am a teacher! You can never take that away from me.

Respectfully yours,

Joan Hellthaler